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Dreaming-machine

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Dreaming-machine

Diurnal Insomnia in Digital Wonderland

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Introduction

- 1 There is a cultural tradition, both cinematic, literary and scholarly¹, of likening digital communication to dreams, of correlating them and positing them in various causal constellations. On a more general level, the digital constitutes an expression of a long-lasting human dream (come true) of tethering — via technology — all spheres of existence (Hayles 1999) whereas our capacity to dream, as well as a cultural understanding of the role of dreaming undergo a deep transformation due to digitization. As Sherry Turkle observes, “The computer takes us beyond a world of dreams [...] because it enables us to contemplate mental life that exists apart from bodies. It enables us to contemplate dreams” (Turkle 1995: 22), equally indicating a machine-led dissociation of dreams from the human. The ubiquity of sensors and sentient apparatuses, the Internet of Things and Places, together with computational networks, engender an immanent code-space (Kitchin & Dodge 2011) which makes the dream bypass both sleep and daydreaming, and assume the form of a body-snatching² simulacrum. Historically motivated and conceptually amalgamated by a dream of perfect control and protection in the Cold War era, and a countercultural dream of living without constraints (Turner 2006), the digital has evolved as a technology of the paradox by attempting to creatively reconcile the two inherent opposites of determinacy and liberty. Affirming and exploring the culturally ambiguous status of the digital — its discreet position in between the concrete (the real) and the abstract (the virtual) — this essay recasts digital cultural production as a “dreaming-machine,” all the while disentangling the meaning of dream. Positing computation in terms of a cultural symptom, and offering a critical-creative account of dreams in digital culture, this essay will unravel some of the negative ramifications of the liaisons between dream and digital code, and point towards their alternative aesthetic configuration.

I. Between Dream and the Digital

- 2 To make my argument more transparent, we must first clarify the concept of “dreams” given the semantic wealth and the cultural being of the term. Etymologically, the term stems from old Norse (“draumr”)³ and Proto-Germanic (“draugmaz”),⁴ two languages in which the term broadly denoted phantasm, illusion, or deception. Additionally, its Western meaning is strengthened by the Platonic theory of images where it designates imperfect — sensible, changing and epistemically untrustworthy — copies of the ideas, and yet ones which are generative of mirth, rejoicing and merriment, which the dream’s old Anglo-Saxon provenance (“drōm”)⁵ articulated later on in terms of music playing.⁶ Importantly, in contemporary culture — significantly shaped by psychoanalysis (Freud 2010)⁷ — “dream” designates a sleeping vision, meaning “to somniate” in the first instance (*OED*). The popular sense of dream as an aspiration, ideal or wish dates back to the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (*OED*), and paradoxically implies that ideals can come to life only in dreams. Consequently, “dreams” will retain their proximate relation to reality — whether in sleep by unconsciously re-playing remembered experiences, or by inspiring our conscious choices and actions. This similarity of dream and reality is exactly what distinguishes it from fantasy that, in essence, imaginatively expresses a digression or flight from reality, helping us to experience the (im)possible in a more approachable and delicate manner; *only* dreams (can) come true. Furthermore, these two elementary designations, i.e. sleeping dreams and waking dreams (whether in the form of ideals, wishes or daydreams), emerge out of a primordial structure dichotomously governing our experience of fatigue (i.e. oscitancy, somnolence) and repose (i.e. daydreaming).
- 3 Digital culture appears to skillfully conjoin and play with these two meanings of dream, constituting both a mirthful dream-coming true of “silicon” technocrats and an inexhaustible mine of dreamlike visions of digital future,⁸ all the while spitting out various examples of digital intoxication, ecstasy, anxiety, addiction and alienation, having us commonly perceive the virtual as a sleepless, oneiric Wonderland unfolding in front of our eyes, and gradually immersing us sensibly in its synthetic environment.
- 4 My contention, therefore, which may appear counterintuitive at first sight, is that digital code and its rhizomatic cultural production are expressive of what dreaming bodies can do, that is, the ontological labor of sleepless dream, and as such, a diurnal, rather than nocturnal, practice of insomnia, a wakeful existence that neither anaesthetizes the senses nor fears the worst of nightmares. Rather than drawing a utopian or somnambular, post-media vision of digital civilizational growth, my proposition of the dreaming-machine — complexifying our conventional image of the medium — nuances the convergences and corruptions that intercede and interlace dream and computation. Consequently, the digital will be immanently reconfigured as a production of entanglement between dreams of machine and machines of dream. This necessitates reconceiving the notion of dream, which — after Gilles Deleuze — I postulate in terms of diurnal insomnia. Dispensing with the negative image of the digital as narcotic and deceptive, I will recast it as *exhaustive*, emphasizing its *inceptive* aspect. In order to illustrate my theoretical discussion, I revert to the film under a telling title, *Inception*, which is read aesthetically as an adequate rendition of the insomniac revolution in dreaming.

- 5 The 2010 film by director Christopher Nolan offers a curious meditation on the world of dreams. *Inception* tells the story of a group of thieves who specialize in extracting secret thoughts from the subconscious while the person is dreaming by employing a “dream within a dream” technique. On the whole, this is a story about people sharing a dream, which necessitates limitlessness in the selection and employment of means of expression (Taubin 2010: 32). Aesthetically and narratively blending the genres of action, heist, mind-game (Elsaesser 2009), thriller, science-fiction, crime, mystery, adventure and film noir, the movie does justice to the actual economy of dreams. Questioning the nature of dreams, *Inception* attempts to develop a pedagogy of dreaming, which I consider to be a timely and adequate rejoinder and alternative to the contemporary digital-cultural usurpations and abuses of dreams. The film explores the human capacity for insomniac dreaming, which — far from being a mindless, technologically induced, reaction to exponential growth of the digital realm — emerges as a vigilant response to its totalizing and militaristic Zen of algorithmically enhanced existence, successfully avoiding the traps of digital dialectics. I side with Deleuze, who claims,

It is not at all the case that the revolutions are determined by technical progress [...] The technocrat is the natural friend of the dictator — computers and dictatorship; but the revolutionary lives in the gap which separates technical progress from social totality, and inscribes there his dream of permanent revolution. This dream is itself action, reality, and an effective menace to all established order: it renders possible what it dreams about. (Deleuze 2004b:59)

- 6 Following Deleuze’s appeal to read cultural and cinematic production *not* in terms of its textuality, ideological value, or even its historicity, but rather vitality,⁹ I investigate what potential extra-textual use(s) the film can have — specifically how it radicalizes and sharpens our understanding of the digital, of dreams and the concatenation of the two. Viewed immanently, away from the specular economy of representation, the film will be read as “a mind/body/machine meld, as experience” (Kennedy 2000: 5), which — in keeping with Daniel Frampton’s postulation about film being not about narrating or showing anything (Frampton 2006: 7) — involves an analysis of how *Inception* thinks dreams and how this relates to digital cultural production.¹⁰ In what follows, I will elucidate some of the cultural entanglements of the dream and the digital, explicating the immanent dream work that is expressive of contemporary digital culture. Consequently, the essay argues for a co-*involution* of humans and digital machines, thus eschewing a dichotomy of either a technophobic tirade of the digital alienation of humanity or a celebration of messianic computation.

II. Dreams in Digital Wonderland

- 7 Digital technology determines nearly all aspects of existence in Western societies. Digital code, paired with computational networks, has succeeded in mesmerizing and beguiling Western mentality, which — as I will argue — is due to their technological aptitude to s(t)imulate dream work. Innumerable techno-digital innovations have provoked a vertiginous and dizzying cultural effect, unprecedented in its speed and scope — far removed from the classic worldview shaped by dominant dualistic metaphysics, thus no longer possible to capture in its purely rational categories. This is manifest in the industrial automation of reality and the hyper-animation of the sensorium, thus triggering a proliferation of fantastic imageries and fuzzy experiences.

Equipped with sensors of advanced body-infiltrating power and endowed with powerful data-crunching, AI and profiling capacities, computational media mine our senses and design experience for us through customization and social anticipation. It is the essentially pre-cognitive and automatic nature of this operation, whereby machines are capable of extracting sensible data otherwise inaccessible to our understanding, and of programming and projecting a context for experiencing,¹¹ that legitimizes a parallel between the digital and dream as involuntarily sensed. Paradoxically, data-saturated environments emerge as characteristic of, simultaneously, an increased psychological alertness, social mobilization as well as intensified desire for digital solutionism, and an omnipresent atmosphere of psychosomatic apathy, emotional dispassion and ethical indifference, which partakes of mind-body split. The latter symptoms can justifiably be diagnosed as an effect of the former. Traditional readings of *Inception* reveal that bodies have to be immobilized and restful (asleep) so that the mind can perform highly complicated problem-solving operations. Furthermore, the sense of general fatigue can also be legitimately attributed to the digital formalization of dreaming, which in turn results in a vertigo of technological invention and innovation.¹²

- 8 Fueled by digital apparatuses, acceleration has been the constant leitmotiv of cultural modernity, leading to a technological demotion of forms of mediation regarded as hampering progress. Stressing the time needed for successful extraction, *Inception* documents that even the instant takes too long, eliminating the experience of gratification, which takes time to be actually sensed and lived, and suspending it in a limbo of anticipation and satisfaction which is forever provisional. This peculiar dreamlike ambiance of timelessness creates an ambiguous sensation of there (both in reality and in dream) being plenty of time (an impression generated in a dream) and no time at all (time increases exponentially as you move deeper through dream levels). Dominic Cobb says, “When you dream, your mind functions more quickly, so time seems to pass more slowly”. Apparently asleep or apathetic at one level, the characters are wide awake and hyperactive at another. Since the film commences and concludes with dream scenes and the majority of the narrative is a dream, experienced by a sleeping Cobb on the airplane, it is impossible to adjudicate where and when the real might be, providing a standardized ground for measuring velocity of the time flow, thus creating a sensation of timeless presence. Rather than hailing the digital as a great facilitator and accelerator, or accusing it of cultural imperialism and impoverishment, the digital, as *Inception* instructs, can be (re)conceived immanently to s(t)imulate a dream of insomnia, thus helping us reinvent ourselves as diurnal insomniacs.
- 9 Eliminating anticipation and virtualizing the past, the digital regime of the (eternal) present is analogous to dream work, where imagery immediately expresses desire with no formal mediation, which — coupled with a capitalistic drive to dismantle all intermediaries, consequently accelerating the communication process — emerges as a symptom of cultural infantilism. Recalling Huizinga’s diagnosis of puerilism (Huizinga 1936: 170-82) the figure of a sentimentalized child embodies the utopia of solipsistic bliss in digital culture — innocuous, instinctual, authentic in its expressions, spontaneous, playful, yet also demanding, defiant, insatiable, and narcissistic. One can note, on the one hand, a moral inversion, as we regard serious matters of life as a game whilst play is treated with deadly seriousness, and on the other, a capitalist-induced psychological need of provisional satisfaction, whereby no object of digitally s(t)imulated desire is ever complete and ready to exhaust all our needs, since another

Beta version is always about to be released (Hammersley 2012: 391-4). Like children, we are trained to learn how to become comfortable with the tentative, experiencing our satisfaction as increasingly ephemeral and dreamlike. Again, the digital serves here as a palliative, offering instant algorithmic contraceptives that secure us from impregnating our existence with the tragedy of endless approximation (of the ideal). Akin to dreaming, by distracting and dispersing our creative vital energies away from sacrificial attachment to a linearized pursuit of the culturally pre-established ideals, the digital facilitates our departure from forever belated representation and rediscovery and animation of the simulacrum. Virtualizing our existence, the digital helps us dream ourselves computationally out of our cultural limitations and in a childlike manner (re)create fancifully an immediate Wonderland, thus — as *Inception* posits — producing a dream more real than (the) real.

- 10 The prevailing soporific atmosphere of contemporary digital culture has also been discretely determined by the shared sensation of weightlessness and incessancy of the code. Both digital code and dreams appear to share the same mechanism of actualization — whether through the intermediary of sensory interface in the case of the former, or retrievable memory in the case of the latter. Paradoxically, this is also what differentiates them — dreams being singular, elusive, unbridled and, content-wise, impossible to repeat as opposed to the code that is iterative, transparent, controlled, and operating complex algorithms born of collective visions. Regardless of ontological distinctions, they both function in the social imaginary as surficial (con)figurations, characterized by depthlessness and lightness, which is also related to their complex nature. One can legitimately say that they are experienced rhapsodically¹³ rather than textually as a clear image, i.e. as vibration or resonance.¹⁴ Digital culture crystallizes a world that may be artificial, but is not counterfeit; conversely, the digital world's (perhaps) initially fraudulent and fabricated dreamlike image has always been real, as evidenced by social media. The siren songs of digital technology have lured and lulled us into a world where one can no longer tell the difference between reality and dreaming.

III. (Digital) *Inception* of Diurnal Insomnia

- 11 This simulative environment reminds us of Alice's adventures in *Through the Looking-Glass*, a sequel to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. When she encounters the Red King asleep in the grass, Tweedledum and Tweedledee tell her he is dreaming about her, and that if he were to wake up, she would “go out — bang! — just like a candle!” (Carroll 2012: 157). This story seems relevant to the actual process of cultural digitization, whereby computational machines are already dreaming a dream of/for humanity. They intensify the conjunction of the digital and dreams, thus stimulating their aesthetic entanglements. Under such circumstances, we need to develop an alternative conceptual framework that, instead of commenting on the reality as it has been and deconstructing the entrenched dualistic opposites, allows us to assess what broader cultural use the dream/digital complex may have in a wider context. Put differently, it is unlikely to answer the question whether one is dreaming or not. “Groups that are too interested in dreams, like psychoanalysts or surrealists, are also quick to form tribunals that judge and punish in reality: a disgusting mania frequent in dreamers” (Deleuze 1998: 129-130). By technologically projecting the virtual realm and encouraging its

exploration, digital apparatuses facilitate our rediscovery of dreams as a proper expression of our own, original, virtual and vital constitution. This consequently fuels reconsideration of our capacity to dream afar from the dualistic and moral frameworks forever downgrading dream's simulacral and s(t)imulative significance in human life.

Dream of Extraction

- 12 This is an especially burning question now when digital media are instituting a novel — dream-driven — communication paradigm. With the digital inception of the virtual, humans have had to learn anew how to navigate within and differentiate between two parallel spheres of existence. Gaining the aptitude to pre-cognitively access and extract sensible data, digital apparatuses are capable of s(t)imulating sensations and perceptions, and using them to design and implement synthetic (future) realities for us to inhabit. Many thinkers have warned us of this groundbreaking technological achievement, which has materialized Heidegger's proposition of *Gestell* as inherent in *technè*, and explored its potential and actual implications for humanity.¹⁵ Clearly, the digital went beyond what had been socially considered technology's purpose — catering to the strictly biological or natural needs of human beings.¹⁶ Breaking with the dominant psychological-functionalist mantra of 'technology begins with a need and ends with a solution', the digital proves to be a medium — and not solely a means — of experience, substantially contributing to the creation of the world. Essentially governed by a will-to-transformation, digital technology reveals what is, offers an "enframing" of possible experience (Heidegger 1977: 20).¹⁷ Discontented with its determining role in culture, digital technology has become "the System" (Ellul 2004: 13). Enveloping bodies with electromagnetic networks and insinuating themselves into the senses, digital technologies have effectively connected us to the system of aggregated servers, submitting us to their computational operations. In doing so, they have bypassed our consciousness and begun to systematically survey our existence and design experience for us by digitally "reengineering presence" (Thrift 2008: 95). The systemic character of this operation and its extensive cultural ramifications prompted Éric Sadin (2011) to diagnose a radical shift in social development, whereby we witness emergence of a novel "society of anticipation." Abandoning faith in tradition as incapable of providing us with a reliable guide to a sustainable future existence, Western societies trust the analytic and predictive powers of digital apparatuses. They are hopeful that their simulative and computational capacities — having already exceeded human comprehension (!) — will fruitfully generate adequate responses, forecasting optimal solutions and programming livable futures. Essentially supportive of the predictive faculty of machines, dedicated algorithms are specifically geared towards extracting (i.e. stealing in *Inception*) and profiling sensible data. Delegating the power of creation to algorithmic media leaves us no choice but to *anticipate* and have confidence in the script they compute and customize for us, synthetizing an alternative reality. Crucially, the digital dream of the future actualizes itself in the present, programmatically determining and channeling our potential becoming. Since our consciousness is not able to grasp a future that has not yet been lived, it is now culturally trained to anticipate its computational diegesis and algorithmic synthesis, which again coincides with the capitalistic reformatting of pleasure and education in how to derive enjoyment from the provisional. This cautions us that we ought not to trust dreams as they are an automatic process and can, therefore, be easily coopted by

digital capitalism targeting the future anterior of (digitally-inflected) existence. After all, dreams are filled with either daytime's residues or constitute a sterile reiteration of things past. As early as the 1920s, D.H. Lawrence — criticizing psychoanalysis' schematic and naïve view of dreams — warned us about dreams by saying, "We have to be wary of giving way to dreams [...] That which is lovely to the automatic process is hateful to the spontaneous soul" (Lawrence 1923: 169-170). Nowadays, our experience turns out to be a coming-true of a future dream digitally *incepted* in the present whose accomplishment will forever have to be preempted by yet another one: we exist in endless anticipation. This can be illustrated by a range of contemporary cultural practices, starting with the capitalistic monitoring of customers to provide customized products and ensure narcissism-fueled subscription, through app-based and algorithm-controlled dietary and self-care rituals, and ending with statutory surveillance of populations to enforce order, quantify and qualify citizens,¹⁸ or the forecasting and programming of social policies and budgetary plans. This results in replacing the classical communication paradigm of feedback with a prior feed-forward, which consists in digital (and precognitive) extracting of sensible data from us and the world that — having undergone algorithmic computation — will virtually have returned to us, molding our near-future actualizations. Feedback will by necessity come later as a mode of communication with an always already (pre)constituted presence, whilst feed-forward enables technical communication with digital dreams through an intermediary of sensible interface, which altogether makes it impossible for us to differentiate anymore between the reality of dream and the dream of reality — the two becoming one dreaming reality, a dreaming-machine.

- 13 *Inception* puts forth an immanent political economy of dreaming, prioritizing the architectural question — whose dream are we in? Further to this, it reminds us that dreams are a risky business, and they will always dialectically attract the non-dreamers' profit-oriented attention. Deleuze cautions us:

People's dreams are always all-consuming and threaten to devour us. What other people dream is very dangerous. Dreams are a terrifying will-to-power. Each of us is the victim of other people's dreams [...] Beware of the dreams of others, because if you are caught in their dreams, you are done for.¹⁹ (Deleuze 2006: 318)

- 14 Consequently, the society of dreamers emerges as a society of prisoners, affectively enslaved and subservient to others' desires. In sleeplessly creating mazes — labyrinthine architectures far more complex than reality as we know it, far more secretive and alien — *Inception* demonstrates that we stand a chance of outsmarting the vicious dream of the (digital and capitalist) Other. Digital code is always already a metaphysical Other, that is our perfect dream, our cultural dream-come-true of perfection: it thus belongs to us, expressing in fact sameness rather than authentic difference. Therefore, mindful detachment from this logical framework, attained via *in-somniac* dreaming, necessarily has to proceed immanently — as the film advocates — by involving an inception of a far more radical dream born from within our visceral sensibility. Only digital intoxication generates either convulsive or compulsive symptoms, or sheer numbness. The digital *per se* is not an impoverishment of existence; it partakes of the human condition, thus immanently facilitating its revival and our cultural transformation.²⁰ An affirmative, aesthetic, reconceptualization of digital culture is especially crucial today when, as *Inception* brutally pictures, both technology and dreams turn into spaces of conflict and corruption where corporate interests or intersubjective dramas are played out in a banal fashion, or into spaces of

militarization, narcissistic conformism and heathenish tribalism. Disavowing the dialectic of dreams (the virtual) and reality, an insomniac dream — unlike any other dream that places temporal limits on all our waking projects and conscious involvements — welcomes (self-)extraction as a precondition of blissful oblivion and inception of a novel idea, of an existence unstained and unhaunted by the (digital) Other's dream. The last image from the movie of a spinning top rotating on a table — which is Cobb's method of distinguishing between dream (it spins without falling) and reality (it falls) — could leave us in doubt as to the space he inhabits then. However, the fact that Cobb is not looking at it clearly expresses his disinterest in this dialectic. The scene does not purport to warn us about self-delusion in order to stay happy, nor even about not knowing whether one is lying to oneself or not — both options convey moral judgment. The spinning totem affirms the multiplicity of the idea, its inceptive, i.e. incessant and innumerable, actualizations — the *virtual* origin to which Cobb's insomniac dream reconnects him.

Diurnal Insomnia

- 15 Rather than being an attempt to accomplish the impossible by negating the representational construction of dreams and denying their inceptive nature, digital culture is intent on exhausting the possible by both simulacraly extending the dream up to a point of non-distinguishability between reality and dream, and reducing it to a minimum, which creates a paradoxical condition of *diurnal insomnia*. “This dreamless sleep in which one nonetheless does not fall asleep, this insomnia that nonetheless sweeps the dream along as far as the insomnia extends — [...] such is the way of escaping judgment” (Deleuze 2006: 130). Diurnal insomnia cannot be formally conflated with, and imaginatively compared to, either the (sterility of) dream or the (intoxicated) consciousness, which pale beside its dreamful exuberance. Dreaming is no longer opposed to insomnia, the latter becoming its virtual driving force. Put differently, by playing (with) dreams, the digital gives culture an incentive to reinvent itself as an insomniac dreaming-machine, that has made of dreaming “a guardian of insomnia that keeps it from falling asleep” (Deleuze 2006: 130). Insomniac dreaming retains ghostly agency both in its passive synthesis²¹ and commitment to resist the soporific or intoxicating allurements of established values and habits that dull awareness, and thus is characterized by vigilance — a watchful condition that replaces epistemic criticism.²² I dream and in dreaming I affirm more than I know: dreaming is not so much the condition of possible knowledge but the location where I can *virtualize* knowledge. Diurnal insomnia is tantamount to a power to dream expressed as the reality's power to simulate. Far removed from the fallacy of a “thing” with a “location,” dreaming designates a mirthful and dynamic — discreet — process of incepting, which immanently exposes us to the forces of creation. Grasping this paradoxical position of dream in *The Difficulty of Being*, Jean Cocteau writes,

What is certain is that this enfolding, through the medium of which eternity becomes livable to us is not produced in dreams in the same way as in life. Something of the fold unfolds. Thanks to this our limits change, widen. The past, the future no longer exist; the dead rise again, places construct themselves without architects, without journeys [...] Moreover, the atmospheric and profound triviality of the dream favors encounters, surprises, acquaintanceships, a naturalness which our enfolded world ([...] projected onto the surface of the fold) can only ascribe to

the supernatural [...] I say natural, because one of the characteristics of the dream is that nothing in it astonishes us. (Cocteau 1967: 57)

- 16 Dreams no longer oppose reality; the dream of insomnia expresses a profound dream of and into reality, a becoming-dream of reality; that is its immanent creation — *a dream within a dream*, a vertiginous state of intoxication that our waking life has to learn how to fold so that we can sustainably endure the world's dream of eternity by mindfully reducing and organizing its unlivable speed.
- 17 Doing justice to Jack Kerouac's observation that "everybody in the world dreams every night ties all humanity together" (Kerouac 2001: xv), *Inception* configures sleepless dreams as a unique material interface, a solitary laboratory of the senses, a discreet activity that can bring us together (again) within and without the digital system. Far from a grandiose and apocalyptic, dialectically-fueled, vision of what the future may be like when machines rise against their progenitors and reduce them to total subjection, the film develops a *discreet* image of the virtual, successfully bypassing the polarity of utopian and dystopian scenarios. The postmodern philosophical operation of removing foundations serves here as a basic leitmotif — extirpation of established truths is joyously welcomed and inspires a thorough transmutation of both waking and dream reality. Interestingly, the loss of metaphysical qualities has historically coincided with the era of technological triumph, which altogether strengthened the cultural potential for liberation, enabling social dis-alienation. Crucially, technology alone is far from emancipatory. *Inception's* message is clear — neither does modern technology herald a revolution as such, nor is revolution an appropriate answer to technological will-to-power. Emancipation from entrenched dualistic metaphysics in the movie does not proceed by force or dialectical combat; it involves an act of dreaming. *Inception* delivers an instructive seminar on the mechanics of insomniac dreaming that begins by enlisting its two characteristics. Firstly, dreaming, as an act, "has to be made" (Deleuze 1998:192) and in the making, it makes our existence insular and unreproducible. Secondly, given that a dream is like no other, inherently different in terms of length, intensity, and content, each one heralds a new start — an inception. "Dreaming [...] is dreaming of pulling away, of being already separate, far from any continent, of being lost and alone — it is dreaming of starting from scratch, recreating, beginning anew" (Deleuze 2004a: 10). The constitution of the dream of insomnia, however, is far from Platonic. Deleuze continues, "To dream is to gain access to this world where nothing resembles anything else; a pure dreamer would never leave the particular, he would grasp only differences" (Deleuze 2004a: 45) The film makes it exceptionally clear that to think of dreams as mere appearances, free-floating images without logical association, motivated by real experiences and loosely readapted during sleep is to utterly disregard their s(t)imulative inceptive nature. As such, dreams have easily been appropriated by digital machines that subsume them under the virtual, which turns dreams into screens upon which messy and infantile images of an especially primitive imagination are projected, thus downgrading their aesthetic and cognitive potential. Nonetheless, digital technologies have reawakened our capacity to somniate by depathologizing²³ dreams and framing them as a pragmatic tool for enriching our existence. Consequently, as the film shows, it will not suffice to debunk the (digital) dream of reality as it will forever unfold yet another somnolent layer. One needs to tire oneself of this incessant pursuit of *dreaming*; one needs to feel the heaviness of the labor of the dream one is tied to actively and passively, and reach the level of exhaustion — insomnia, that constitutes a prerequisite of a mindful dream of new sensibility. *In-*

ception (of an idea, i.e. of change) necessitates *in-somnia* — simultaneously *in-voluntary* and *in-voluted* dreaming, a dream *within* a dream, as the main protagonist, Dominic Cobb who is incapable of sleeping, emphasizes, “Downwards is the only way forwards.”

Original Exhaustion

- 18 Exposing the limits of modern skepticism by means of dreams, *Inception* digs deeper into its legacy in order to radically question the (subjective and objective) ground of the understanding of our experience, suggesting that it may be virtually elsewhere. In doing so, it therefore explicitly tackles the problem of origin.²⁴ This time Cobb and his team are tasked with the more difficult job of implanting — “incepting” — an idea into the mind without it being aware of it. Pirating or extracting a secret, as the present level of digital advancement proves, is no longer a real challenge and, curiously, it is socially perceived as not an insurmountable issue. With the industry of sensible data mining and synthetic engineering of pre-cognitive fate, and digitally s(t)imulated social narcissism legitimating exhibitionistic proclivities, digital culture promotes unencumbered publicity, condoning the capitalist exploitation of secrecy and favoring the ultimate renunciation of privacy (Lanier 2014). *Inception*, however, breaks (out of) such a social regime and requires a different strategy from either theft or willful or apathetic surrender. Dreaming provides an architecture for implantation, which highlights its germinal nature — of both receptivity and fecundity. By virtue of their automatic nature, dreams are chosen as the perfect portal to ingress into an act of thinking. In order to produce (i.e. implant) this incept (i.e. idea), the thieves first have to enter — break into — the dream within their target’s dreams. Implemented from the outside, thought is represented as a violent act. It originates by abolishing the reality from which it has violently emerged and to which it lays claim, hence its criminal and properly inceptive nature. The film makes conspicuously little use of digital apparatuses, suggesting virtuality is embedded in humanity for humans are always materially immersed in the world’s technologies, unlimited to the digital doubling of reality achieved by communication media. *Inception* immanently exhausts the origins of thought in the imaginative terrain of dreams, demonstrating that the idea expresses an insomniac dream, a dream exhausting the virtual potential of dream reality. Prior to its inception in the mind of another person, the idea itself must be produced. There is no original starting point (which is a virtual dream of representation); rather an infinite vortex of multiple forces, a dream of exhausting potentialities, a discreet middle ground, the idea itself — the virtual. A pure concept does not suffice; the incept calls for a greater imaginative elaboration — it brings together percept, affect and concept. As such, it can be interwoven into a dream with its own internal physical architecture and symbolic design. The procedure of inception demands that the mind be put to sleep, which appears misleading only if we dialectically oppose the dreaming reality of sleep to the conscious reality of the mind. When we dream, we do not realize that we are dreaming, forgetting²⁵ that the dream is our only reality and the mind is an image — an idea immanently ‘incepted’ into its course. “It is a dream of the mind that has to be made, fabricated” (Deleuze 1998: 172). As such, the dream is charged with a crime against the constituted (dualistic) order of reality, but — more importantly — the mind is a criminal act itself. The tagline of the film announces, “The dream is real and your mind is the scene of crime”, echoing Hélène Cixous’s observation about the criminal power of dreaming,

We should write as we dream [...] it's healthy, because it's the only place where we never lie [...] Now if we think that our whole lives are built on lying — they are strange buildings — we should try and write as our dreams teach us; shamelessly, fearlessly, and by facing what is inside every human being — sheer violence, disgust, terror, shit, invention, poetry. Our dreams are the greater poets. In our dreams we are criminals; we kill, and we kill with a lot of enjoyment. But we are also the happiest people on earth; we all make love as we never make love in life. So at least let's not forget that we have secret authors hidden in our unconscious [...]

(Cixous 1990: 22).²⁶

- 19 *Inception* pictures the machine-based process of the immanent making of the unconscious, inviting us to face the formidable ontological velocity and aesthetic complexity of the virtual. It is logical to infer that the act of (sleepless) dream must be contingent on exhaustion and thus requires courage and singular accountability to/for one's own becoming (of oneself) through virtual creation of a meshwork of sustainable relations. When we are exhausted, we are on the wrong path, doing something that (we sense) contradicts our nature, diminishing our joy of existence. But exhaustion — as opposed to (fatality and finality of) fatigue — equally remains originally open-ended, pointing towards the infinite. *Inception* emerges as a treatise on the art of exhaustion — on how the possible (of dreaming and of reality) gets exhausted in the dream of insomnia; and that act of violence perpetrated on the possible leaves us physiologically debilitated to the point of total renunciation and disinterestedness — the art of detachment, *par excellence*. Exhaustion is the condition of detachment from the possible and virtual creation of the real.
- 20 Given the inceptive nature of digital technologies, we can wonder whether our exhaustion has us surrender to the digital (dream). Or is it the dream of the digital that exhausts us? Or again, could it be the digital (dream) that exhausts itself? Either way, it is exhaustion that abolishes any *sense* of reality. From this vantage point, the digital can well be viewed as an art of exhaustion; it exhausts reality as we know it. It stands for a human-machine effort of extraction/exhaustion of the culturally possible, which — aside from weariness, mindless addiction and narcissistic convulsion — proliferates affirmative ideas and architectures of existence. Expressing a different, techno-logical, point of departure for cultural growth from that of the traditional Western metaphysics, the digital immanently infiltrates and inflects the real as we have known it, thus simultaneously exhausting and augmenting it. Through dizzying, Escher-like, topological mazes, *Inception* aesthetically exposes us to, and expresses an ontology of, incessancy, an exhausting incessant return as our only origin, a veritable vertigo of absolute monism.

Coda: Dreaming-machine

- 21 Even though *Inception* does not explicitly address digital code, the film aptly grasps the “dream predicament” that characterizes contemporary digital culture. Making use of the mechanical and automatic functions — that have dominated established discourses on dreams, relegating them to the nocturnal sphere of the mind's sleep — the movie sets off on a far more revolutionary journey into sleepless dream. The dream is not deceptive but virtually inceptive.²⁷ Through the dream of insomnia, the film rediscovers a vertiginous virtual field of forces that no longer differentiate between technology and sensibility, but discreetly entangle them, albeit oftentimes

imperceptibly. Back in 2010, the year of *Inception*'s release, what could have appeared as a fuzzy dream or a far-fetched prophecy has become our reality: digital code via sensory interfaces wrings sensible data from us and the world, thus virally materializing itself and algorithmically enfolding our existence. The film, however, does more than just project a possible digital future. It exhausts the possible of the digital (dream) to reach its virtual origin in the present, thus offering a vigilant theory of its cultural, inceptive, being. In dreaming — as *Inception* illuminates — we are diurnal insomniacs, mobilizing and virtualizing the past in the present.

- 22 By exhausting the automatic tension of the dream, we incept the digital, thus anaesthetizing its narcotic power. In the current dream of capitalistic perpetual growth through technological enhancement, the digital — fostered by the beta-desire of corporate mediocrity — has served global optimization; its virtual potential remains thus yet to be maximized and exhausted. Our “dream predicament” under digital capitalism — marked by virulent automatism, soporific repetition, and hedonistic fetishism — emerges as the cultural symptom of a wider digital fatigue, producing only tarnished dreams. Technologically determined solitariness — as in a classic dream formula — triggers a virtual dream of collectivity, which cements our digital alienation and engenders social numbness, which in turn triggers the perverse process of mass expropriation. We are facing an exhaustion of secrets to dream with; secrecy becomes obsolete in a digital regime of transparency. It looks as though we know how to dream, and yet we are unable to actually do it anymore. We no longer have secrets and have become secrets ourselves. This is where (the inception of) insomniac dream begins. Diurnal insomnia helps us effectively move beyond what the digital (possibly) could be to what it virtually *will have been* — a dreaming-machine. Let me conclude with a passage from Fernando Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet*:

I've dreamed a lot. I'm tired now from dreaming but not tired of dreaming. No one tires of dreaming, because to dream is to forget, and forgetting does not weigh on us; it is a dreamless sleep throughout which we remain awake (Pessoa 2010: 70).

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NOTES

1. For instance: Jean Baudrillard (1993), Mark Stefik (1997), Slavoj Žižek (1997), Fred Botting (2000), Randal Doane (2006), Paul Virilio (2012), Jayne I. Gackenbach (2009), Stephen Brock Schafer (2016).
2. This is a metaphor Marc Augé proposes to account for the "invasion of images" through which "the new regime of the imaginary [...] nowadays touches social life, contaminating it and penetrating it to the point where we mistrust it, its reality, its meaning and the categories (identity, otherness) which shape and define it". (1999: 2).

3. 'Draumr' designates an imaginary event observed while sleeping, whereas its cognate 'draugr' stands for ghost, spirit, apparition.
4. 'Draugmaz' literally expresses 'to deceive', 'to injure'.
5. 'Dröm' denotes joy, pleasure but also music and song.
6. Interestingly enough, this latter rendering of dream prevailed in Old English, and the meaning of 'vision' or 'sleep' took over the meaning of somniative activity.
7. Interestingly, Freud indicates two mental processes that stimulate the emergence of dream — first, unconscious processes formative of a wish expressed by the dream, and, second, prohibitive processes that impede and pervert the expression of the wish. Thus, dreams are defined as a form of wish-fulfillment.
8. For instance, cyborgian, transhumanist, extropian, posthumanist, singulitarian.
9. In *Anti-Oedipus* (2004: 116) Deleuze and Guattari write: "Reading text is never a scholarly exercise in search of what is signified, still less a highly textual exercise in search of a signifier. Rather it is a productive use of the literary machine, a montage of desiring-machines, a schizoid exercise that extracts from the text its revolutionary force"
10. Significantly, the collected volume *Inception and Philosophy. Ideas to Die For*, edited by Thorsten Botz-Bornstein (2011), which offers an array of critical perspectives on the film, emphasizing its cultural and philosophical importance, makes no reference to the digital. Neither does it address the dream of insomnia, nor has recourse to Deleuze's conceptual framework. This essay is partly intended to fill this conspicuous gap.
11. Many thinkers pointed out the peculiar proximity and relation between technology and dream. Dreams were already considered a *medium* of the soul in ancient Rome. Marcel Mauss, in *A General Theory of Magic*, states that dreaming "promotes and protects technology" (1972: 142). Richard Stivers, analyzing the magical characteristics of the mass media, concludes that by effectively fragmenting our elementary experience of time and space, dreams create "dreamlike mood[s]" (2001: 112). In his most recent work, Mark B. N. Hansen writes, "When this data is fed-forward into our embodied experience [...], it marks and cannot but mark the intrusion of a radical exteriority into consciousness, an exteriority that cannot so much be interiorized as introjected" (2015: 220-222). Compounded by our sensible data, redesigned and profiled — both individually and collectively — by digital machines, sensory experience becomes a work of computational dream and, by implication, our cognition becomes increasingly involuntary. Technically, this bears a striking resemblance to the mechanics of dreams.
12. A relevant case in point is provided by Frank Moss, former Director of the MIT Lab, in his work *The Sorcerers and Their Apprentices: How the Digital Magicians of the MIT Media Lab Are Creating the Innovative Technologies That Will Transform Our Lives* (2011), where he emphasizes the role of dreams in the invention, innovation and distribution of digital apparatuses.
13. I refer to 'rhapsody' in both formal (i.e. social, organizational) and psychological (i.e. experiential) sense. Building on two Greek terms 'rhaptein' (to stitch, sew) and 'oide' (ode, song), rhapsody adequately renders the univocity of dream and the digital, emphasizing the entangled and sprightly nature of their relation.
14. I mean 'resonance' in a Simondonian sense, i.e. as a mode of material intra-resonance among disparate forces — otherwise coexisting only with tension — that establish individuality (Simondon 1989).
15. See Nigel Thrift (2007), Éric Sadin (2011; 2015; 2016), Mark B. N. Hansen (2015).
16. See Arnold Gehlen (1980). Importantly, this traditional, commonsensical, view of technology, which is theoretically supported and perpetuated by both Plato's dualistic metaphysics and Kant's phenomenology, considerably differs from Heidegger's innovative proposition to conceive it not in terms of a means, but of a medium of experience, thus a mode of existence.

17. In contradistinction to the dominant tradition of *Vorstellung*, *Gestell* points to the emergence of phenomena. In Heidegger's account, *Gestell* constitutes technology's essence, which — far from instrumentalism — denotes a mode of human existence (Ibid., 19-35).
18. How far the digital extraction of secrets can go is demonstrated by recently published news about an AI application built by Michał Kosiński, the Stanford University Professor, and his research collaborators, that can tell our sexual orientation by computing a handful of facial photographs and our online traces. See Levin (2017).
19. The last sentence from the quotation reads in the original: “*Si vous êtes pris dans le rêve de l'autre, vous êtes foutu*”, which emphasizes jeopardy and doom.
20. Even though the digital and the virtual have two distinct yet simultaneously valid ontologies, they contribute equally to our existence, albeit differently in terms of means and mediums. On the immanent plane of forces, they remain co-expressive and in perpetual struggle, one attempting to exhaust the possible of the other) and contribute equally to our existence, albeit differently in terms of means and mediums. See also Evans (2010).
21. *In-somnia* expresses an active operation of dreaming oneself into the always already dreamed reality.
22. It can be argued that insomniac vigilance purges philosophy of the Kantian hangover of the critical imperative, rediscovering the sense of thought — away from quest for wisdom — in an exhausting love of mystery. In a text from 1987, significantly titled “The Truth according to Hermes: Theorems on the Secret and Communication”, François Laruelle, making a similar point, conceptualizes a non-philosophical hermeneutics that places secret at the heart of thought. As “the Uninterpretable”, the secret expresses the immanent truth (2010: 20) — it is not wisdom that is sought or attempted, but mystery that animates the quest. Announcing the debacle of philosophy, Hermes heralds *philomysterion*, a love of mystery, a secretive love of something paradoxical, both the most remote from, and most proximate to, life itself — its sense. Going beyond the phenomenal (representation) and the noumenal (truth) alike, vigilance consists in indefatigable exploration of the mysterious insomniac realm of the virtual (simulacrum).
23. Yet, admittedly, digital technologies have simultaneously placed the code at the heart of dreams, so that this abstract, governing and alienating structure now occupies the place of the Father.
24. ‘Inception’ etymologically derives from Latin and denotes commencement, initiating event.
25. Forgetting is an act that can be equally structural (unconsciously repeated) and intentional (ideologically reiterated): thus, some ideas automatically — i.e. via cultural dreaming — cement socially, thus becoming (apparently) eternal or transcendent.
26. In *L'Ange au secret* (1991: 226) Cixous writes that dreams provide a return to “life before the law” and “take us back to the cradle of humanity”; my translation.
27. I differ from the analysis of *Inception* delivered by Mark Fisher (2011: 37-45), where he reads dream as deceptive and easy to manipulate. He concludes, “In *Inception*, as in late capitalist culture in general, you're always in someone else's dream, which is also the dream of no one”.

ABSTRACTS

The intensified sensory contact with digital media and their capacity to pre-cognitively extract sensible data and industrially reengineer experience make our existence increasingly feel like a

dream. Through an examination of the aesthetic and ontological dimensions of dreams, this article argues for a reading of digital cultural production in terms of diurnal insomnia. What can a dreaming body do? Addressing that question, this essay will recast its insomniac capacities in non-representational terms. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's philosophical framework, the essay disentangles the traditional Western conception of dreams and develops an alternative proposition of a dreaming-machine. In doing so, the essay will make references to the film *Inception* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2010), which is read as an aesthetically adequate rendition of the insomniac revolution in dreaming. Probing the vigilancy potential of insomnia for the political economy of contemporary digital culture, the essay postulates an aesthetics of exhaustion. Far from an algorithmic lullaby, digital culture is recast as an aesthetic exercise in insomniac exhaustion that allows us to experiment with alternative manners of dreaming (of) ourselves, our worlds and lives beyond digital/digitized consciousness.

Nos interactions sensorielles de plus en plus nombreuses avec les médias numériques, leur capacité à extraire des données sensibles de manière pré-cognitive et l'industrie de préformatage de nos expériences nous donnent de plus en plus souvent le sentiment de vivre comme dans un rêve. Après une analyse des dimensions esthétiques et ontologiques du rêve, nous reviendrons sur la production culturelle numérique comme insomnie diurne. Que peut faire un corps qui rêve ? Hantés par cette question et inspirés par les écrits de Gilles Deleuze, nous examinerons le champ de l'insomnie pour nous détacher de sa représentation occidentale traditionnelle et travailler la proposition d'une machine à rêver. *Inception* (2010), le film de Christopher Nolan, nous offre un exemple de ce que pourrait être cette révolution insomniac du rêve et une introduction à l'esthétique de l'épuisement à travers l'investigation du potentiel du thème de l'insomnie dans l'économie politique de la culture numérique contemporaine. Loin d'être un somnifère algorithmique et par-delà ce dont nous avons conscience en ligne, la culture numérique devient le lieu d'un exercice esthétique de l'insomnie qui nous permet d'expérimenter de nouvelles manières de rêver nos mondes, nos vies et nous-mêmes.

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Mots-clés: code numérique, culture numérique, insomnie diurne, rêve, *Inception*, Nolan Christopher

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